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[Reprinted from the *Proceedings* of the National Educational Association, 1903]

THE SCOPE AND RESULTS OF MOTHERS' CLASSES

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There is a homely old adage which says: "You must first catch your fish before you can fry them." But its meaning is of especial value to the kindergartner who is about to organize "a mothers' class." The time has passed for educated mothers, in intelligent communities, to lift their eyebrows when told that a mothers' class is about to be started in the neighborhood, and that it is to be conducted by a kindergartner who is an unmarried woman. Educational conventions, child-study clubs, scientific magazines, and sometimes the pulpit have brought to such a class of women the facts that chemistry, biology, psychology, and sociology, all of them comparatively recent sciences, have revealed many things which will be of value to them in the bringing up of their children.

In such communities the kindergartner needs only to have tact, a certain amount of polish of manner, a due sense of her own limitations, and "a divine enthusiasm" for the cause which she has, at least partially, mastered, and she wins the day. The mothers themselves will teach her many things and give her flashes of insight far deeper than they realize. She has only to hold to the few eternal verities which have made the kindergarten a power in the land, and the mothers will supply illustration after illustration of the genuineness of the truth she has proclaimed, and will astonish her with its applicability to the details of ordinary home life.

The intelligent mother is always willing to listen to anything which may help her to rationalize her efforts in her child's behalf, if she can be convinced that this is the case.

In ignorant, or even in half-informed, neighborhoods much tact and ingenuity have to be exercised, first to bring the mothers together, and then to continue the class long enough to enable them to realize that there are certain inborn instincts in *all* children which should be understood; that there are certain laws of child-nature which cannot be violated without bringing inevitable punishment. This is not an easy task. Yet the mother-heart is there waiting to be touched.

One of the most successful devices for getting these mothers interested in mothers' classes is visiting in the homes of the children. Another efficient method of getting into the hearts of the mothers to whom you would teach the better way is to invite them to the birthday celebration, Christmas and Easter festivals, valentine parties, and similar red-letter days of the kindergarten. Every mother enjoys seeing her child made

happy, and the sight brings her a step nearer to the woman who has given this joy to her child.

Next in importance, in this socializing process, comes a cup of good, warm coffee, with perhaps a bit of coffee bread. It is well known in social circles that the click of the cup breaks the ice of reserve, and it is just as true among these shy, oftentimes tired, mothers in the lower walks of life as it is among the rich. It warms them up in more senses of the word than one.

Experience from all over the land shows that, except in the neighborhoods of the abjectly poor, the mothers soon offer to provide these simple refreshments and enjoy dividing themselves into groups of entertainment committees, each serving in turn. The mothers' class thus becomes their social club. Any real activity in which all can take part is as valuable in a mothers' class as in a kindergarten. Music is always a help; finger songs may be learned, or ball games for the baby.

Another common device has been to have kindergarten songs and games with the children and mothers together, and then to send the children with an assistant to the park or to another room, and explain in simple fashion to the mothers the value of the exercise.

Some easily accomplished hand-work may be brought in, such as cutting out of patterns for children's garments. In such cases a ready-made garment should always be shown to encourage the class to try to make one like it. A lesson on the construction of simple toys with which to amuse the younger children on rainy days leads naturally into a talk about the value of keeping children employed as the best preventive of mischief. The making of Christmas cards and childish valentines have started many a mother of limited means in the right way to cultivate her children's self-activities.

Among foreign-born populations an eager interest has been awakened by showing pictures of famous places in the "old country" and by means of someone of them who speaks English calling from them reminiscences of their own early days or their trip across the Atlantic, thus giving them an opportunity to describe what is the great event by which they record time. It is well to follow such an afternoon by one in which the famous and beautiful places and buildings of America are shown and explained, in order that they may realize that this country also has a history and a future of which they may be proud.

A whole volume could be filled with such suggestions as these. Yet each live kindergartner creates her own methods of winning the interest and confidence of her mothers. It must always be kept in mind that such meetings, however, are introductory merely to the real aim of a kindergarten class for mothers. It must never descend into a gossip club. Nor must the kindergartner rest satisfied to have it continue an amusement hour, much as such hours may be needed in some neighborhoods.

A mothers' class, to be a real, vital power in a community, must lead its members, first, to realize the tremendous significance of their work as mothers. The divine right-of-kings idea has worked untold mischief in the past. A man born a king must do kingly deeds. But where is the unwritten history of the wrongs and crimes that have been committed under the equally erroneous idea that because a woman has borne a child her treatment of it *must* be motherly? I could cause your blood to curdle with harrowing details of the treatment by mothers from which our humane society rescues children. But we need not turn to the debased element of society to see a mother who is injuring her child even while loving him. Who does not know the weak mother who yields to her child's caprice, the vain mother who overdresses her child, the ambitious mother who pushes her child's studies at the sacrifice of his health and character, the preoccupied mother who never plays with her child, the fault-finding mother who never praises her child's honest efforts, the unsympathetic mother who never sees the child's point of view? But I need not add to the list to convince you that, great as is the power of mother-love, it needs to be rationalized to be made conscious of its power, or else it may work untold evil as well as immeasurable good.

A direct appeal must be made to the nurture element which lies in the breast of every woman who is worthy of the name of woman. From the dawn of recorded history wherever women have been found nurture has been found. The old myth of the she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus is but the primitive way of asserting what the experience of the race had already proved, namely, that even the mother who has not risen beyond the brute instincts has the nurture element within her. A belief in this nurture element is the keynote to the truly successful mothers' class. It is the highest element in woman, and, if rightly developed, leads her into the highest form of womanhood. I do not mean sentimental gush, nor do I refer to the morbid love of self-renunciation which is sometimes called unselfishness; but rather that deep spiritual element in woman which makes her intuitively feel the weakness or need or discouragement of another when her more outward-looking brother has not yet perceived it, and that makes her rejoice in serving, rejoice in growing, that she may serve the more and the better. This spontaneous unconscious nurturing element in her must be rationalized and made a conscious power. This is the aim and scope of mothers' classes.

When you ask me what are the results, a vision comes before my eyes, the richest vision that all my work has left me, of class after class which have grown in such a thought-atmosphere as this; and I see their faces grow luminous as little by little they learn to think of their work, not merely as an individual work of love which concerns their own children, but as a great world-work whose influence will go on for generation after generation.

The first great result of rationalizing mother-love is that it dignifies the office of mother. With this dignifying of the office comes the dignifying of its every detail for the sake of the end in view—the giving to the world of one more man or woman, strong in body, clear in intellect, warm in heart, and deep in that spiritual life which feels the God-presence every hour. This trained mother knows that sending her child out into the world without a strong body is sending him to his life-task with broken tools. Aye, more, she knows that his body reacts on his mind and soul; that the health of the three is inseparable. It is the inner life of her child that she has learned to watch and to nourish as well as the outer. So she prepares his food, or sees that it is prepared, in the most wholesome manner possible, not merely that he may have good digestion and grow in stature and in size, but with his feeding comes her guardian care that he may learn to eat to live, not live to eat. She watches over his sleep and his quiet waking hours, not merely because she has learned that diseased nerves are generally the result of too much excitement during childhood, and that fatigue poisons the blood, and poisoned blood unbalances the mind, but also that the peace which passeth all understanding comes only from quiet, serene communing with nature and with self. The too "strenuous" life that is being forced upon our American children is preparing a generation that will fear not God nor keep his commandments. I say this from both a physiological and psychological standpoint. The child that hears not "the God-voice" in his childhood will not be able unhesitatingly to distinguish its words of command in later life. I do not mean by this that each child should not have active life—an abundance of it; that, whenever it is possible, there should be allowed perfect freedom for the "motor nerves" to respond to the "sensor nerves." This nature will see to, if we will permit her. But I had reference to the overstimulation of the sense-perception in childhood—a common fault of today.

Let us return to the rationally trained mother. She has learned that she cannot too early begin her child's social training in gratitude, courtesy, and compensation toward the world-workers by whom he is surrounded and sustained. Even in the nursery she begins to help him play that he is a carpenter, a blacksmith, a cab driver, or other server of mankind; for unless he can enter into the consciousness of the solidaitry of the race, she knows he will never comprehend the height nor the depth nor the true meaning of living. Nothing that affects the life of her child is uninteresting or unimportant to such a mother; for she has learned to see it in its bearing on the inmost life, by which all outer life is made rich and beautiful, or mean and poor.

Again, such a study leads the mother to look upon her work from the standpoint of a universal work. She learns that most of her problems are the problems of all mothers. I have held possibly a hundred mothers'

classes. Some have been large, containing many mothers, and some small, with not more than a score of members. Yet when "Questions and Answers" day came, I have never failed to have asked in some form the question: "What would you do with a child who lies?" "How should I manage a boy of ten who teases his little brother?" "What would you do with a girl of thirteen who is disrespectful?" "How can a slow child be cured of dallying?" etc., etc. A little book written for a small circle of Chicago mothers and dealing with these universal characteristics of children has already leaped the boundary of five foreign languages.

Does not this short outline show where the stress of mothers' class work should be placed? Not until a mother has learned to look upon her child, not as *her* child, but as a life given to the world that she is allowed to unfold and develop for humanity's service; not until she has learned to look upon her newborn infant as one more effort of the divine life trying to manifest itself in concrete form, is she ready for the highest work of motherhood, the real spiritual motherhood of her child. When this day comes there will be such a religious awakening as the world has never dreamed of.